“Behind the Scenes”

(God’s Sovereign Work as Illustrated in the Book of Esther)
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Illustration:

If you have ever been to a Broadway play, or better yet to Sight and Sound, you have to be impressed with all the work that goes on behind the scenes --- Those often over-looked include the directors, choreographers & music directors, make-up artists, those who make the props, the stage crew who set it all up, the sound crew. What happens on the stage is relatively minor in terms of time and effort compared to what happens behind the scenes.

So it is on the stage of life. We see the actors. We see world events; We see what happens in our little world. What we don’t see is the sovereign working of an Almighty God making moves in the visible and invisible realm, in the angelic realm . . . in the realm of the heart, motive and desire. . . creating the abrupt disturbances that alter direction of people and nations.

Brief synopsis: The book of Esther is about an attempt by an evil bureaucrat named Haman to exterminate all Jews from off the earth. Haman was an “Adolf Hitler” before Nazism and the Holocaust; He is an “Anti-Christ before the Last Days of the Great Tribulation. This book is also about 2 people whom God uses to save the Jews; Two heroic people, Mordecai and his young cousin Esther. How does the Lord do this?

Today, we will enjoy the story of the Book of Esther taking a special look at God’s sovereign hand and providential working behind the scenes.

A little Background to Esther:

- The setting takes place in the ancient Empire of Medo-Persia (the Kingdom which conquered and took over ancient Babylon).

- Nebuchadnezzar transported Jews to Babylon in the great Babylonian Captivity. Included in those people was the great grandfather of Mordecai.

- In 539 B.C. Cyrus in his conquest of Babylon probably moved some of the Jews eastward to Shushan and other cities in Medo-Persia. Mordecai was one of these. (Esther 2, 5, & 6)

- Ahasuerus (His Hebrew name means “Majestic prince”) or Xerxes (his Greek name) reigned from 486 to 465 B.C.

- The events of the Book cover a period of ten years, from the great Feast of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) in 483 B.C. to the Feast of Purim in 473 B.C.

The Plot

Brief summary as taken from the Wycliffe Bible Commentary edited by Pfeiffer & Harrison - pages 448 through 456.

"On the last day of a seven day feast in Shushan the Palace, King Xerxes (Ahasuerus) called for Queen Vashti to appear before his drunken nobles to show her beauty. Her refusal provoked the King's wrath, and he followed the advice of Memucan, one of the Chief Princes, that she be divorced by a public decree. This punishment, the men reason, would be instructive to all wives throughout the Empire to honor their husbands.

"When Xerxes longed for Vashti again, it was proposed that a new Queen be chosen for him from among the most beautiful virgins in the land. Esther, a young Jewish who had been reared by her cousin Mordecai, was among those brought to the house of the women. Xerxes loved her more than any other and chose her to be his Queen.

Soon afterward, Mordecai discovered a plot against the King.
Through Esther the matter was reported to Xerxes, and the criminals were executed.

"Mordecai refused to bow before Haman, whom Xerxes had elevated to the second position in the Kingdom: and consequently Haman's wrath was aroused against Mordecai's Nation. By means of the lot (pur), the fateful day was determined for the destruction of the Jews, and Haman promised to the King all their confiscated property. Haman sent letters to the entire Empire in the Kings name, announcing the day of the Jews destruction.

"Mordecai's great mourning provoked the curiosity of Esther, who then learned from him of the decree and of his desire that she appeal to the King. When she protested this may prove fatal to her, Mordecai insisted that this was her responsibility to God. She promised to go to the King if Mordecai would join her in a three day fast.

"The King graciously received Esther, and she in turn invited him and Haman to a private banquet. At the banquet the King offered to grant any request she might have; she asked that they come to another banquet the next day. Haman was overjoyed at the special invitation, but was chagrined at Mordecai's refusal to bow before him. Haman's wife and friends suggested that he obtain permission from the King to hang Mordecai on the gallows which he would build.

"Unable to sleep that night, the King had the official chronicles read to him, which told of Mordecai's unrewarded loyalty in exposing a plot against the King. When Haman arrived at the cot to ask for Mordecai's death, he was asked what honor should be bestowed upon a favorite of the King. Thinking of himself, he suggested very elaborate exaltation, only to be told that he had to do these honors to Mordecai the Jew. When he arrived home, his wife and friends warned him that if Mordecai was indeed a Jew, he could not prevail against him; his own doom was surely sealed.

"Esther asked the King for the preservation of her people from destruction and boldly accused Haman of being the adversary. The King went into the garden enraged at this discovery, and returned to find Haman pleading with Esther for his life. Accusing him of attacking the Queen, he ordered Haman to be hanged on the same gallows he had built for Mordecai.

"Haman's property and position were now given to Mordecai by Xerxes and Esther, but the King was unable to revert this decree against the Jews; so he empowered Mordecai to issue a new decree to counteract the first.

This was quickly done, and the Jews were now permitted to defend themselves on the thirteenth of Adar, the date which Haman had originally set for their destruction. This produced great rejoicing everywhere and many became Jewish proselytes.

"When the fateful day arrived, the Jews successfully defended themselves with the aid of government officials and slew 500 men in Shushan, including the ten sons of Haman. Esther obtained permission for the Jews to defend themselves a second day as well, and three hundred more enemies were slain in Shushan. In the Providences 75,000 enemies were slain. The Feast of Purim was then established by special letters to commemorate this tremendous deliverance. A second letter confirmed the first and provided for a fast as well. Mordecai's greatness and his love for Israel were recorded in the chronicles of the Kingdom."

Chap. 1 – 2

God in His sovereignty worked behind the scenes preparing matters which would be important in the future.

No name for God is mentioned in the book of Esther (not Yahweh, not Adonai, not Elohim). By omitting His name, God is emphasizing the all-important theme of this Book. That He, while invisible, imperceptible (to the lost world), and unknown in name by the vast majority is constantly at work in the hearts and lives of His people.

Though God's name is not mentioned in the book of Esther, His fingerprints are on everything good that happens in the Book.
Example: In creation, God did not write His name in the sky, but what He has made gives clear evidence of His power and Glory!

"… The Book of Esther, then, serves the purpose of showing how divine providence oversees all things: even in a distant, far country, God's people are yet in His hands… "(Edward J. Young, An Introduction to the Old Testament, page 349)

God's sovereignty is evident throughout the book of Esther. Examples of God's providential control in Esther 1 & 2:

1) The prosperity of Ahaseurus' (Xerxes') kingdom (1:1-9)

It is evident throughout Scripture that God raises up kingdoms and brings them down to the ground (cp. Daniel 4)
"… the author emphasizes the stupendous power and wealth of this King (verse 1), in order to show the marvelous providence of God in elevating a despised Jew (Mordecai) to a position of honor in such an Empire." Wycliffe Bible Commentary, p. 456

2) The rebellion of Vashti (1:10-14)
Her rebellion against the king actually opened up the opportunity for:
--her position as queen to open up (1:16-20)

The king's advisors reasoned that when insubordination is tolerated, everyone else will hear of it and do likewise. Such lack of respect (if allowed) would produce the women's lib movement of ancient Persia.
1:16-17 – It is indeed true that Rebellion to authority if left unchecked will embolden people to rebel against the authorities in their lives;
--Vashti's example to serve as a warning (1:21-22) – men should serve as leaders in their home

3) The selection of Esther (2:1ff)
--her unsurpassed beauty (2:1-4)
(If someone has an attractive appearance, this is no matter to be proud about. Give God thanks and realize He has a purpose for it. Ladies, your beauty is for your husband. Not for you to flaunt to attract attention to yourself. God has a sovereign purpose for the short, the tall, the handicapped, the not-so-attractive. We can trust His sovereign purpose with whatever seen or unseen traits we possess.)

--the death of her parents (ordained of God) so that she would be brought up with Mordecai. It was no accident, but part of God's plan and purpose. Though we do not realize the reason for calamities, hardships, deaths of loved ones, etc., we can trust that God is in sovereign control of all things and that He allowed it to fulfill His good plan and will.

(Illustration: The pastor who lost his young daughter in a car crash; He learned to love and lean on God's sovereignty.)

--The fact that Esther & Mordecai (her cousin) are not yet back in the land of Israel is part of God's providence.

H. A. Ironside in his book, Notes on Ezra, Neh. & Esther on page 8 of his introduction to Esther states: "In this book we have Israel in what was really a self-chosen path, for opportunity had been given to return to the Land of their Fathers, there to rebuild the City of God, but they preferred to remain where they were rather than endure the hardship of immigrating to Canaan. They were in Persia and Babylon when they might have been in Palestine, gathered around God's center at Jerusalem."

About 50,000 Jews chose to return to the Promised Land with Zerubbabel and Joshua in 536 B.C. (Ezra 2:64-67)

Although it can be argued that Esther, Mordecai and many of the remaining Jews were living in disobedience to God's allowance for them to return to their land, it also must be pointed out that God in His Providence allowed some to stay in the immediate presence of the king of the greatest empire on earth at the time, so that God might save Jews from perishing everywhere through His working in and through Mordecai and Esther.

God has a sovereign purpose for the particular location He has you living in. He has a mission for you in this place and at this time.

--the conspiracy uncovered (2:19-23)
Mordecai (due to his care of Esther) was at the right place, at the right time and would save the king's life and be repaid later.

Chapter 3

Due to his religious convictions, Mordecai would not bow before Haman. This lack of allegiance would result in wounded pride, selfish anger, and a devilish plot to wipe out not only Mordecai, but the entire Jewish race.

We as Christians and Jews today must be prepared for such a future plot, whereby the world's antichrist forces will plan our demise. However, God is always at work behind the scenes.

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews was:

1) Triggered by arrogance and selfish anger (3:1-6)
2) Promoted and perpetrated by lies and deceit (3:8)
3) Voluntarily paid for by the diabolical Haman himself (3:9)
4) Decreed into law by the highest authority in the land (3:10)
5) Orchestrated (prepared for) by a global conspiracy (3:11-15)

The thirteenth (13th) of the 12th month was planned to be extermination day for the Jews. The number 13 has never been a favored number in Scripture or in the history of Israel. We have all heard of the superstition behind "Friday the 13th" Many Jewish elevators do not have a 13th stop on the elevator (they often omit the 13th floor). It's not that they don't have an actual 13th floor, they just label it the 14th floor and omit the 13th because a lot of people are superstitious. In Las Vegas, many casinos and hotels don't have a 13th floor per se, it's not publicly accessible, but it is used for kitchens and laundry and storage facilities and is only reachable by service elevators. This superstition is originally due to the planned annihilation of the Jews on the 13th day of the last month of the year (the 12th month - Adar).

However, this "bad day" would in fact become a day of remembering victory for Israel as the Purim victory celebrated by Queen Esther would take place on the 14th & 15th day of Adar and this would become an annual celebration.

Purim (/ˈpʊərɪm/; Hebrew: פּוּרִים (help. info) Pûrîm "lots", from the word פּוּר pur, related to Akkadian: pūru) is a Jewish holiday that commemorates the saving of the Jewish people from a conspiracy to destroy them. This took place in ancient Persian Empire. (Wikepedia)

The news of this evil plot to wipe out the Jews leaked out and news got back to Mordecai (Esther 4).

Mordecai then made a request that Esther do something, and fast! Go to the King, beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of your people" he would say.

Esther seems to respond in fear and apprehension (4:10-11)

Mordecai responds by giving Esther 3 challenging appeals:

Mordecai says in effect, “this is a matter of priority, privilege, and providence”:

1) **A matter of <u>priority</u>** <u>(urgency)</u> (v.13) - If you do nothing, it will come back to hurt not only your Jewish people, but YOU YOURSELF “The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing”

2) **A matter of <u>privilege</u>** (v.14a) - If you do nothing, God will still work, but He will do so without you. He will choose some other way to get His job done. (Anyone of us can easily be replaced)

3) **A matter of <u>providence</u>** (4:14b)– You must do something for God brought you to this position and place “for such a time as this”
   God in His sovereignty raised up Esther to appeal to the king for “such a time as this” (4:14).
   The Lord also has you and I here on earth for “such a time as this!”

Esther will agree to go to the king, and will request that fasting be done prior (no doubt including prayer)

She is willing to take this step of faith and responds with these famous words “if I perish, I perish” (v.16b)

Though God works sovereignly, it takes steps of faith on the part of God’s people to thwart the works of Satan. God uses human instrumentality to accomplish His sovereign purposes.

Chapter 5 – 6

Haman’s pride and arrogant boasting reflect the type of man he was (5:11);

Note: the marks of pride in Haman’s life (Note: 5:9-14):

- Feelings of superiority (v.9)
- Unrighteous anger (v.9b)
- Hypocrisy (v.10)
- Boasting and bragging about his riches, family , positon and prestige (v.11)
- Self-importance (v.12)
- Disdain for others who do not worship you (v.14)

Haman’s pride comes back to bite him (6:6-13). May God forgive us for our pride and arrogance!

5:14 – While Haman was working to build the gallows to hang Mordecai, God was working on Mordecai’s behalf (6:1ff).

In Esther 5-6 God's sovereign working is so obvious (from His working in the king's heart to listen to the burdened heart of Esther (5:3) to now his insomnia on the very night Haman prepared to kill Mordecai (6:1-3).

No one can fight against God and win!

"The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord" – and so is his sleep! Divinely produced insomnia (better than an "Five Hour" energy drink!) kept the king awake. With no TV to watch or internet to browse, the king requests the chronicle book of his reign to be read to him.

Mordecai's day of reward will now come. The good deed in protecting the king and Mordecai's blowing the whistle on the conspirators (though unrecognized & unrewarded in the past) now pays it's reward!
(be patient – in due season you shall reap blessing for good seed sown in the past)

Haman will be asked by the king: "What should be done to the man the king delights in?..."

Chapter 7 – 8

Haman receives exactly what he planned to do to Mordecai. He would hang on his own gallows, fulfilling the principles that whatever is sown will be reaped. (7:10).

In Judges 1:7, the Evil King Adonibezek is another Bible example of reaping for what is sown. "And Adonibezek said, Threescore and ten kings, having their thumbs and their great toes cut off, gathered their meat under my table: as I have done, so God hath requited me. And they brought him to Jerusalem, and there he died."

Galatians 6:7 - Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.
Basic principles about the law of sowing & reaping:

1. You are free to plant various seed ("Whatsoever")
2. If you plant you will harvest
3. You will reap <u>exactly</u> what you plant (in <u>kind</u>)
4. You will reap at a <u>different</u> <u>season</u> than when you planted (for Haman, the reaping would arrive rather quickly; however, there is often a delay)
5. Reaping is <u>impartial</u>, <u>predictable</u>, <u>unavoidable</u>, and <u>immutable</u>
6. You can't <u>alter</u> the harvest, only the <u>planting</u>
7. You can't do anything about the <u>past</u>, but you can do something about the <u>future</u> (begin planting new seed!)

Like a boomerang, the unforgiven past comes back to take sudden impact on Haman.

Why does the law of "sowing and reaping" always inevitably come back? Because there is a God in Heaven keeping the score and righting all wrongs! "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" says the Lord!

Chap. 8 – Interesting how Mordecai's righteous act comes back to save all of his people from perishing, just as Christ's righteousness and righteous act has saved multitudes from perishing.

- Observe the 180 degree turn of events toward Mordecai. Instead of being killed by Haman, Mordecai will wear Haman's signet ring (8:2),
- Obtain Haman's estate (8:2b),
  Instead of losing his property and possessions, Mordecai would be given the mansion of his arch enemy.
- Instead of being a victim of a mass massacre, Mordecai would be granted the privilege to write a legal bill of rights allowing Jews all over the kingdom to defend and protect themselves. (a declaration of self-defense and protection for the Jews world-wide (8:11). The law of the Medes and Persians could not be changed but the king allows Mordecai to write an additional law (a law which would allow the Jews to defend themselves).
- Mordecai would also wear the royal garments and kingly crown.

This declaration of Jewish self-defense (which allowed them to defend themselves) would become an occasion for joy and celebration! (8:16-17)

Esther 9 – God's promise to curse those who curse Israel (Gen. 12:3) comes upon Haman's co-conspirators and upon his sons.

9:1 – "The tables are turned" on those whose plan was to destroy the Jews. The Jews were allowed to bear arms and take the offensive against their enemies.

9:6 – In the citadel of Susa, the Jews destroyed 500, including Haman's 10 sons (v. 8), who were hung on gallows the next day (v. 13). Also on the 14th day of Adar, 300 more were put to death in Susa. In the rest of the provinces of Persia, the Jews in self-defense killed 75,000, but did not touch their possessions or property.

On the 14th day of Adar, they rested and made it a festival time of feasting and joy. Purim would also become a time of celebration, gift giving (v. 18) giving to the poor (v. 22). These 2 days of Purim (14th & 15th of Adar) would become a national holiday for the Israelites.

At the annual "Feast of Purim" the men would offer prayers in the synagogue. They would then read the book of Esther. When Haman's name was read, men would stomp the floor with their feet and would say in unison: "Let his name be blotted out; The name of the wicked shall rot".

10:3 – Mordecai the Jew served as second in rank to King Xerxes (he is evidently referred to as "Marduka," an official at Susa under Xerxes – as excavations at Susa and cuneiform texts reveal).

Mordecai's legacy: 10:3 – "He worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews."

Conclusion:

Practical Applications of God's Sovereign work behind the scenes of our lives, or family and ministry:

1) God was working behind the scenes forming your body and preparing your personality and gifts <u>when you were in your mother's womb!</u>

   Psalm 139:1ff

   Jeremiah 1:5 – "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations."

   "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called *me* by his grace," Gal. 1:15

2) God was working behind the scenes to <u>save your soul</u> and bring you into a reconciled relationship with Himself.

   He used divinely orchestrated situations and circumstances to bring you into contact with the Gospel.

   He drew you to Himself through His Gospel message and the working of the Holy Spirit.

   No man seeks God independently (Rom. 3:11), so God drew you to Himself (John 6:44, 65) and, as He did to Lydia, He opened up your heart (Acts 16:14).

3) God is working behind the scenes to <u>accomplish His will in your life</u> (as a believer)

   Philippians 2:12-13 – "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

   Note: None of this divine work excludes your responsibility to yield and obey God's Word.

   The Lord also is involved in <u>discipling</u> us (Hebrews 12:6).

4) God is working behind the scenes in your <u>family, friends, and fellow-believers</u>.

   He has prodded you to pray for others, and is in the process of answering those prayers in His time and in His way.

   He is using your prayers, testimony, and gentle ministry to bring those beaten down by sin to a point of repentance.

   2 Timothy 2:25 – "In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth"

   He is at work adding to the church. Illustration: God burdening Thomas Overmiller for full-time pastoral ministry at the same time He burdened the Sawyers for an international training ministry.

- HISTORY = HIS STORY
- He is in control. Nothing surprises Him.
- He is working all things together for His glory.

An Illustration of God's Sovereign Working

In 1938 a Polish fighter pilot named Roman Turski developed engine trouble and had to land for repairs in Nazi-controlled Vienna. While staying in Vienna, Turski was out for a walk when a fleeing man literally slammed into him. When the fearful man cried, "Gestapo! Gestapo!", Turski rushed him through the lobby, up to his own room, and hid his slender body under the covers at the foot of his bed. When the German Gestapo banged on Turski's door, he pretended that he had just woken up. They checked his passport and shouted questions, but left without searching the room. Communicating by gestures, the frightened man tried to ask Turski for help to escape to Warsaw. Displaying his flight map, Turski indicated he couldn't take him to Warsaw – he drew prison bars on the margin of the map to show that his new friend would be arrested at any airport. He decided he would land in some meadow just over the Polish border, and his passenger would be on his own. And that is exactly what they did. When Turski landed at the airport the police were there to search his plane; they'd been told he had assisted a man to escape from Vienna. They found nothing, so had to release him. Turski asked why the man was wanted, and the police replied that he was a Jew!

Through the coming years, Turski served as a fighter pilot, then was imprisoned and later escaped from a concentration camp. Eventually he went to England to continue his fight against the Nazi's with the Royal Air Force. In the Battle of Britain, he rammed a German plane and was hit by a scrap of its tail. Partially blinded with blood, he was unconscious when he crash-landed his plane in England. His skull had been fractured, and the chief surgeon at the hospital thought it useless to operate. There seemed to be no hope for the brave Polish pilot.

But Turski later awoke and saw a narrow face looking down on him. The fellow in the white smock spoke: "Remember me? You saved my life in Vienna." Turski remembered and learned the rest of the story.

The fugitive passenger had eventually made it to Warsaw, and before the war he escaped to Scotland. When he heard that a Polish group of pilots had bravely fought in the Battle of Britain, he wrote to inquire and learned that Turski was indeed one of the pilots. He knew Turski's name because it had been written on the margin of the flight map Turski had shown him that day long before. Then he read of a Polish hero shooting down five enemy planes and crash-landing near a certain hospital. The newspaper said the flyer's condition seemed hopeless. Immediately the man asked the Royal Air Force in Scotland to fly him to that hospital.

Turski asked him, "Why would you come here?" The man smiled and answered: "I thought that at last I could do something to show my gratitude. You see, I am a brain surgeon – I operated on you this morning and saved your life."

Who could have guessed that by shielding a fugitive, Turski was saving his savior! Rescuing one Jew seemed like an isolated act of help that would have no connection to the future. But God was at work behind the scenes, and that "one Jew" that he rescued turned out to be the one brain surgeon who could save Turski's life!